

Maj. Gen. Torrence Saxe

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By Sgt. Seth LaCount

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Air National Guard volunteers assist Mat-Su Valley kitchen to help meet local needs

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska — Since mid-August, Alaska Air National Guardsmen assigned to the 176th Force Support Flight Sustainment Services who are local to the Matanuska-Susitna Borough area have been volunteering their time to assist the Five Loaves, Two Fish Kitchen in Wasilla.

"As a force in readiness, the relevancy of the National Guard increases through the flexibility of these Airmen," said Alaska Air National Guard Master Sgt. Franz Deters, the senior noncommissioned-officer-in-charge of the volunteer effort.

The kitchen relies on donations from the Food Bank and other various foundations to prepare quality meals for local Mat-Su residents in need. The organization employs one professional chef, Air Force veteran Mike Gordon, with the rest of their staff completely made up of unpaid volunteers. The kitchen sits next door to Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, whose kitchen committee heads up the operation.

"When the Guard started volunteering here, we were very short staffed," said Duane Hanson, one of the kitchen's dedicated civilian volunteers. "Their work here has kept us on track in our efforts to help as many people as we can."

The Airmen work twice a week for three hours each day, preparing about 600 meals per month.

The National Guard Airmen are certified in food handling, with years of experience cooking in the Air Guard. They have been assisting the kitchen in food preparation, which consists of peeling, cutting, dicing, and cooking various food items, before their put into sealed packages.

"I take pride in the fact that I work with a team that never says 'It's not my job,'" said Deters. "I work with men and women who will volunteer to go where they can have the biggest impact."

According to Deters, this unique volunteer opportunity to serve the local community also helps his team meet mission essential training requirements for their work in service career fields for military service.

"We get to help Alaskan citizens, filling in at a time when there are fewer available volunteers, all while getting training that allows us to gain additional experience in our jobs that we do for the Guard," said Deters. "It's really a win-win."

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Good Shepherd Pastor Rick Cavens, retired Alaska National Guard chaplain, oversees the kitchen staff. The kitchen provides meals to My House Homeless Teens Resource Center, Knik House and Family Promise. Recently, the kitchen started a meal program for Mat-Su School District families, with the intention of providing a food portion big enough to feed an entire family.

“I have two extended families, my church and my military family,” Cavens said. “The National Guard has offered a tremendous helping hand during this difficult time of uncertainty. We’re very thankful for their hard work and dedication to helping the local community.”

PHOTOS

1. **Attached pdf** includes story and a small selection of low-resolution photos for viewing on screen.
2. **Story link:** <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/380175/air-national-guard-volunteers-assist-mat-su-valley-kitchen-help-meet-local-needs>



(From left to right) Alaska Air National Guardsmen Tech Sgt. Brayden Van Bevera, Airman 1st Class Fionna Kelty, Tech Sgt. Allen Wilson and Senior Airman Alex Choi, all members of the 176th Force Support Flight Sustainment Services, cut fresh produce at the Five Loaves, Two Fish Kitchen in Wasilla, Alaska, Sept. 25, 2020. Food preparation is one of the many steps in creating quality meal packages for local Alaska residents in need. The Airmen have been volunteering at the kitchen since mid-August, preparing an average of 150 meals per week for local non-profit organizations. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Seth LaCount/Released)

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Members of the Alaska Air National Guard's 176th Force Support Flight Sustainment Services stand alongside the dedicated kitchen staff of Five Loaves, Two Fish Kitchen in Wasilla, Alaska, Sept. 22, 2020. "I have two extended families, my church and my military family," said pastor Rick Cavens, retired Alaska Air National Guard chaplain who oversees the volunteer staff. "The National Guard has offered a tremendous helping hand during this difficult time of uncertainty. We're very thankful for their hard work and dedication to helping the local community." (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Seth LaCount/Released)



Alaska Air National Guardsmen Tech Sgt. Brayden Van Bevera and Tech Sgt. Allen Wilson work alongside head chef Mike Gordon at the Five Loaves, Two Fish Kitchen in Wasilla, Alaska, Sept. 22, 2020. The Airmen have worked with the dedicated kitchen staff since mid-August, preparing fresh, cooked meals for Alaska residents in need. The kitchen provides meals to My House Homeless Teens Resource Center, Knik House and Family Promise. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Seth LaCount/Released)